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THE OBSESSION

Continued from page 8

head. He picked up the guitar. "It was a stupid story, wasn't it?"

THE next few days were very hard to get through. If he really cared, I never thought he could give me up so easily; but he was as hard as a rock. He set his lips, and went to work, and never looked at me again. I didn't expect to be taken so at my word—and the cruise was drawing to a close! I was dreadfully unhappy.

And then I had Thomas on my hands. I don't suppose he was having a very good time, either; but I wasn't caring much about that. Thomas was pulled two ways. On the one hand my eccentricities scared him out of his wits; but on the other hand he had gone too far to back out, and Father and Mother were waiting to give us their blessing.

FINALLY the last night came around. The Lorelei was lying in West River, and next day we were to run up to Sparrows Point, and so home. I thought I should never see French again, and my heart was about broken. Also Thomas was unpleasantly ardent.

The moon was full now. It rose like an immense pale Japanese lantern out of the bay. Thomas and I were in the stern as usual, and French was away up in the bow. He had left the guitar below.

"Our last night!" Thomas began in his most sentimental tones.

I shuddered at what was coming. "Last night the nightingale woke me," I murmured foolishly—that was one of French's songs. "You're not paying attention," Thomas complained.

"Paying attention!" I said crossly. "My head is going round like a revolving cage with a squirrel in it—and you're not the squirrel," I added under my breath.

"I don't believe it," said Thomas. "You're as sensible as I am."

This was pretty good for Thomas. "Thank you," I said sweetly.

"You're just putting me off!" he whimpered.

"Where?" I asked.

"Oh, Erda, be serious!" he said, trying to take my hand.

"Mustn't," I said. "I'm like poor Aunt Lizzie."

"How?" he asked.

"Aunt Lizzie always said her hands weren't finished and mustn't be disturbed."

But my imaginary Aunt Lizzie had lost her terrors. "I don't care if your whole family was crazy!" Thomas blurted out.

I got up and walked to the end of the rail. I should explain that the after deck of the Lorelei was encircled by a stout rail. It ended amidships, and there was a place there by the davits where you could step right off.

I stood there hanging to the rail and looking off at the moonlight on the water. Did you ever, when you were bothered about something and couldn't sleep, try imagining yourself floating in calm, cool water? Try it sometime, and see how quickly you fall asleep. I thought of that then. There were all my troubles pressing on me, and at my feet the delicious water. The river was as smooth as oil, and its surface had a lovely dusty effect in the moonlight. Besides, I had been in only once that day and my dress was ready for the wash.

Thomas came up and tried to put his arm around me. He was so clumsy! "I'm going to kiss you!" he said.

I felt it coming like a hot blast over the desert. I had already slipped my feet out of my best white pumps. I just stepped off.

I stiffened my body and went straight down. The embrace of the water charmed away all my troubles. When I came up I could have sung for joy. I struck out for the moon.

BEHIND me I heard a cry and a splash like a cow falling in, and I knew Thomas was after me. Poor Thomas! he hated the water at night. Then I heard a clean cut splash like a round stone dropping in, and I knew French had dived. I had no doubt about which one would catch me first.

He soon came up. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

"Sure!" I said. I couldn't think of anything romantic.

"Put your hand on my shoulder, if you're tired," he said.

I wasn't; but I put it there. He turned his head and kissed it.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To the moon!" I said.

He understood. "Good old water! Good old moon!" he cried.

We swam for a little while, and then we heard a frightened cry behind us.

"By Gad! I forgot Thomas!" French cried.

So had I. We turned and raced back. Halfway to the Lorelei we came upon him floundering and gasping, just about all in. French took him under one arm, I under the other, and we shoved him back to the ladder like two tugs with a waterlogged barge. There his terrified father and mother hauled him aboard.

"My hero!" cried his mother.

French and I loitered in the water. It so beautiful we couldn't bear to go in. His arm came stealing around me in the most natural way possible, and he caught me to him tight.

"Mermaid! he whispered. 'I just can't keep it to myself! I love you! I love you!'"

As for me, I just kissed him on his strong brown neck.

Fancy! That was the picture that met the eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Bunting when they came rushing back to pull me out. Their eyes almost popped out of their heads. Goodness! what a moment!

MY dear, when we got on deck there was the most dreadful scene! Everybody—but French—talked at once, and no one paid the least attention to what anyone else said. Mrs. Bunting wept, and the old man used language. The two of them joined in calling my poor French the worst names they could lay their tongues to,—"Ingrate! Upstart!" and so on like that. The old man discharged French about five times in a minute. I tried my best to explain; but I couldn't make myself heard. French took it all in silence, looking adorably pale and dangerous.

As for Thomas—you would have died if you could have seen him! There he stood with his hair in his eyes, and his clothes clinging to him, full to the brim with salt water, very groggy, very dignified, and trying his best to look like a hero. When he got through his muddled head what had happened, he pulled me aside. He had a desperate, foolish expression like a clown.

"Erda, you—you can't care about this fellow!" he spluttered.

My dear, I can tell you about it now calmly enough; but at the time, with everybody going at once, I lost my head completely. I didn't know what I was saying. I found myself murmuring slowly:

Hickory, dickory dock,
The mouse ran up the clock;
The clock struck one,
And down it run;
Hickory, dickory, dock!

"There's a mistake in grammar, isn't there?" I asked wildly.

Thomas shrank from me as if I had the plague. He turned to his father and mother, who were still abusing poor French. "Stop!" he said hurriedly. "It's all right!"

They turned to him in amazement. Thomas put on a grand air—and him dripping wet, my dear! "I have given up my pretensions to the hand of Miss Hammill," he said. "Let French go in and win if he can."

"But, Thomas!" cried his father and mother together.

"Let us say no more about it," said Thomas. "I have changed my mind. I will explain in private."

Mr. Bunting shrugged, and curtly begged French's pardon. Mrs. Bunting was more firmly convinced than ever that her Thomas was a hero. We went below and changed.

That's about all, Dear. The funniest thing was Mrs. Bunting's scared and pitying manner toward me, after Thomas had presumably made his explanations. I can hear the dear little lady saying to her friends as she casts up her eyes, "What a narrow escape for dear Thomas!"

We landed at Sparrows Point next day, and I have not seen the Buntings since. Mr. Bunting has made it all right with French—I expect he needs him in the business. . . . Isn't it a love of a ring? . . . The dear boy!

LAM'D THIS KID ALSO

THE first week of school this spring one of the new teachers took her class in natural history for a Saturday afternoon outing through a park. On Monday she was elaborating on what they had seen.

"And now," said she, "while we are speaking of sheep, can anyone of you tell me the names of the male, the female, and the offspring?"

"I kin, Teacher," volunteered the class star. "It's Ram the Daddy, Dam the Mammy, and Lam the Kid."

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